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The Humorist Void: The Clown's Balancing Act throughout History

Stephanie Loera



The image of the clown has held a myriad of aesthetic positions throughout Western history. Traces of this figure are reflected in the current image of the modern and more contemporary version of the popular clown. From the American hobo and ragged carpet clowns, to Bozo the Children's clown and *The Simpson's* Krusty the clown, the modern western clown that we see today has adopted theatrical and material components of historical figures and has been used as guides for their characters. Pantomime, La Commedia dell' Arte, and the court jester have played the most influential role in the formation of the Western clown. Had this sequence of personas not taken place, the western world would not have what it sees today as clown.

This fool entertainer as street performer, theatrical actor, and in general, the paid entertainer is seen in past and contemporary societies

worldwide. In China one finds the various fool jesters of past emperors; in Tamil India the Komali clowns draped in shells set in a permanent smile; in Senegal the fools and outcasts of the Wolof people; and the multiple clown figures of several Native American tribes throughout northern, central and south America, and more.¹ The fool, first serving as an informal source of comedy and entertainment in various communities, later developed into a distinguished and functional member of society. Additional functions, which will be presented later, emerged as a result of their formalized roles; however, the fool has maintained its primary function, and that is as a comedian—a comedian who purposely deconstructs his reality, creating a new humorous lens from which to view the world, and by virtue of his status as “fool”, being allowed to do so. Here in the West we find the most notable fool actor within the clown figure.²

¹ Beatrice Otto, *Fools are Everywhere: the Court Jester Around the World* (Chicago: Chicago Press, 2001), 42.

² The “clown” figure, in this case, will be used to refer to the modern Westernized version of the clown.

The Pantomime



Figure 1 *Maccus of Atellan Farce*

As early as the classical period, the Greco-Roman pantomime could be argued to be one of the earliest images of the clown. The roots of this figure can be traced back to a time of intense religious worship of various Greek Gods. Gratitude was commonly expressed through dance and song, and in many cases a disguise was used during such rituals in order to engage freely within an alternate role. The Romans later split this character from its religious and unspecific personality and created within that

isolated figure, the first pantomime.³ Pantomimes would express themselves through lavished and exaggerated gestures and mannerisms, all the while made up in vividly painted faces, which later evolved into the use of masks.⁴ Their functions were twofold; (1) that of an entertainer and (2) of a facilitator of entertainment through their guise and gestures. They were a main source of Greek and Roman entertainment, but they also used their outlandish appearances and behaviors to “facilitate” the entertainment, something that had not been done before.

What was first used as a form of religious expression, was now giving way to a new colorful breed of unconventional acting. The clown appears to have taken two main traits from this figure: (1) the pantomime’s white face make up and—especially in the case of Atellan Farce pantomime⁵—the exaggerated features, such as various character’s oversized nose and mouth, and (2) the pantomime’s preference for action over dialogue.

In this sense, the pantomime set the precedent for what would later become “La Commedia dell’ Arte.”

³ Annette Lust, *From Greek Mimes to Marcel Marceau and Beyond* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2000), 21.

⁴ In the later years of Greco-Roman pantomime, characteristics were exaggerated and led the way to what would be known as La Commedia dell’ Arte.

⁵ Atella was a region in Italy with a high concentration of pantomimic actors. Each Commedia character seems to find its ancient predecessor within a character of Atellan Farce; the more obvious similarities between these characters appear to be physical.

La Commedia dell' Arte



Figure 2 *Pulcinella and the Harlequin*

La Commedia dell' Arte or La Commedia was first developed in Italy during the sixteenth century by troupes of Italian actors.⁶ La Commedia is likely to have originated from the Latin theatre of *fabulae atellanae* in the city of Atella, the roots of which are found in pantomime. All Commedia players appear to be characterized by some pantomimic trait, such as La Commedia's Harlequin whose phallic accessories and dancer/acrobatic persona resembled the early roman mime, and La Commedia's Pulcinella Centrulo and his physical resemblance to Maccus, the bald lumbering

⁶ Giacomo Oreglia, *The Commedia de'll Arte* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), 1.

peasant in Atellan Farce who wore a long pointy nose and patchwork costume.

La Commedia actors also adopted behavioral traits of pantomime to build upon their own characters. Being that the traveling troupes of La Commedia often found themselves in towns where they did not speak the language, they relied heavily on humorous acts that required little to no dialogue. Although this influence was important in their development, La Commedia also added two unique components that distinguished them from the earlier and more traditional art of theatre—the consistency of characters, as well as the improvisation and adaptation of these actors. La Commedia actors often times avoided written text.⁷ All of this, along with their emphasis on action, built a familiarity within their audience and allowed them to engage without the limitations of language—transcending cultural barriers, which increased their popularity throughout Western Europe.

The characters that came out of La Commedia dell' Arte differ considerably from the contemporary clown, yet vestiges from these classic characters are nonetheless present today. In particular the characters Harlequin—also known as Arlecchino, the most notable of all Commedia characters—and Pulcinella Cetrulo—the good-hearted character with an

⁷ Ibid., 4.

extremist personality—both have left the most apparent traces in today's clown character; traces that can be seen among their dress, technique, and role functions.

The Harlequin's most obvious influence is in his dress. This character wore a motley patterned jacket, trousers, and hat covered in colorful diamond-shaped patches. The disorder of his costume may be representative of an intentional disjunction between status and image –the internal and external disjunction of reality in relation to those around him and his skewed perception. In other words, the harlequin's social and cognitive self stood in contrast with his established environment, and this was deliberately reflected in his physical appearance. The harlequin was the "ever-hungry servant...the credulous and diffident, a lazy-bones, but also a busybody, a mixture of cunning and ingenuousness, of awkwardness and grace."⁸ These characteristics are ever present in our clown today. The person who took on this character had to master various extremes, from physical extremes, to impromptu verbal and emotional cues. This character was very diverse and diversity, as it were, was especially important in an art where the action carried the performance, even more so than the dialogue.

Similarly Pulcinella Centrulo's clothes and foolish personality can be found within the more contemporary clown figure. Although not as

⁸ Ibid. 56.

extravagantly colored as the Harlequin, Pulcinella still exhibited an extreme and disproportionate wardrobe. Pulcinella wore an oversized white shirt divided by a rope at the waist and a large sugar loaf hat. In addition, Pulcinella wore a dark wrinkled mask with an exaggerated mold of a large beak shaped nose. He was absurd, often carrying a bowl of macaroni or a shell shaped horn.⁹ Just as the Harlequin, Pulcinella's dress and accessory mirrors the disproportion in his personality. As Oreglia notes, Pulcinella was a "contradictory character, dull-witted or intelligent, a feigned idiot or a feigned intellectual, open-minded and yet superstitious, cowardly and reckless, a great beater of others and much beaten himself."¹⁰ Pulcinella, whose character was based on a "country bumpkin," was a contradictory character. Just as the clown is used to make light of a person's hypocritical tendencies by adopting a humorous twist, Pulcinella may have represented the same tendencies of past citizens.

As the popularity of the Harlequin and Pulcinella continued to grow, they were unknowingly creating an important reference for clowns to come. Both characters' extremely colorful and oversized outfits indirectly influenced modern clown attire; it is common for clowns to dress in vibrantly colored outfits, often times including an oversized or undersized

⁹ Ibid. 93.

¹⁰ Ibid.

article of clothing such as ties, shoes, ribbons, hats and socks. The red clown nose may also be seen as the remnants of the classic facemask used by actors of La Commedia dell' Arte; facial features, such as the nose, were often exaggerated in La Commedia actors, and although the red clown nose is only a small facial accessory, it is nonetheless considered a mask.

Although appearances present an initial correlation between these classic Commedia actors and the Western clown, the more pronounced and vital influences are found within the personalities and behaviors of the Harlequin and Pulcinella “fools.” Both characters were detached from a balanced mental, emotional, and physical existence. They carried all of the quintessential characteristics of the “fool” – unorthodox yet undeniably human, especially in the most outrageous, awkward and comical moments. These characters remained the same consistent fool actors, only set in different circumstances¹¹ and because of this and La Commedia's focus on action, more so than scripted dialogue, more room was left for improvisation.¹² These same patterns are seen within the clown today.

¹¹ Although each individual clown may vary in name and character, typically a clown, like La Commedia characters, will remain the same character placed in a different circumstance.

¹² Such acts may include, juggling, magic shows, comedy skits, and balloon animals, where a general act was expected however not limited to its sole act.

The Royal Court Jester



Figure 3 *Stańczyk*

Shakespeare once said, “jesters do oft prove prophets.”¹³ This truth must have not gone unnoticed, for the next popular phase in the evolution of the fool is found among the royal court jesters. The popularity of the fool as entertainer inspired its move from the public stage to the privacy of the royal court. The earliest record of the court jester is found within the court of the ancient Egyptian Pharaoh Pepi I, where a dwarf jester served his majesty.¹⁴ Court Jesters were typically defective individuals, deformed, mentally instable, or both, “freakish” hunchbacks, dwarves, cripples and

¹³ William Shakespeare, *The History of King Lear: The 1608 Quarto* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 260.

¹⁴ Otto, *Fools are Everywhere*, 48.

madmen that were bought, or adopted, by the nobility—especially the kings and queens of Western Europe.¹⁵ Despite their entertaining functions, court jesters also acted as unofficial advisors, friends, and companions, links between court and the people, and more. Willeford describes the Jester as being “a domesticated form of the fool who, in other forms, is lawless.”¹⁶ The jester was, in effect, the king’s pet who in being so was no longer subject to the same sanctioning—political, social, familial, and even physical¹⁷ standards.

The jester’s functions were many and more influential than might be initially expected. She or he had a unique relationship with the king that set him apart from others in the king’s life. The nobility’s fascination with deformity and the mental shortcomings of others may have been so for several reasons. Otto suggest that the sobering effects that such unfortunate “creatures” had on their owners not only presented the nobility with a constant reminder of their natural human inhibitions, but the jester, with its humble background¹⁸ provided an essential connection between the king and the kingdom’s ordinary people. The jester could identify with

¹⁵ William Willeford, *The Fool and His Scepter* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 50.

¹⁶ Willeford, *The Fool*, 30.

¹⁷ Even his deformed state made him an outcast of his surrounding environment.

¹⁸ Jesters were typically of lower socio-economic backgrounds.

the common people and was given the opportunity to speak as an ordinary person within the royal court. “The jester who belongs to nowhere and is at ease everywhere could help the monarch reach his subjects, often being a vital, unofficial link between them.”¹⁹ The jester did not hold a serious position, but because of his dismissal as a harmless fool, an innocent connection between king and kingdom could be established.

The jester was also a close friend of the king; this may have been partly due to the isolation that was attached to the role of fool and king and the connection they felt to each other because of this. The jester in all his mental and physical deficiencies was an outcast of his environment. Comparably, the king was isolated by another type of deformity; his role of royalty and ruler kept him locked in his kingdom, estranged from his subjects, and at the will of his obligations as king. Marais, jester to Louis XIII, is quoted as having boldly said to his king “there are two things about your job I couldn’t handle...eating alone and shitting in company”.²⁰ The role of the jester was almost indispensable. The king, in need of a politically detached non-familial companion, had discovered in the jester an outlet and a connection to a distant reality away from the restrictions of polity and royalty.

¹⁹ Otto, *Fools are Everywhere*, 48.

²⁰ Ibid.

The jester with all its political and symbolic functions has also contributed to the development of the clown. The jester has left the clown with interesting accessorial traits such as its multi-colored triangle fabric or the jester's initial rooster hat²¹, which may have inspired the rubber chicken. In addition to this, the jester's true physical deformities have been purposely and superficially adopted and emphasized by the clown. This, for example, is seen in the clown's disproportionate physique, i.e. his oversized shoes, hips, nose, and mouth, as well as its sometimes chubby or lanky appearance.

The jester has also left an ideological tie between itself and the clown. Perhaps this is where the greater connection can be made—between the king and his jester and the Western clown and its audience. Just as the king was in need of a playful escape from the confines of his duty, so does the audience of the Western clown search for a similar escape. The clown fool, by its nature is unbound by conventional rules, thus, allowing the audience to briefly experience the same social freedoms from their life experiences and engage in a moment of playful entertainment. In this sense the jester is not only reflected in the clown's appearances, but also in what the clown has come to represent—freedom from convention.

²¹ Willeford, *The Fool*, 8.

Joseph Grimaldi and the Birth of the Clown



Figure 4 *Mr. Grimaldi as Clown*

The influences of the pantomime, La Commedia dell' Arte, and the royal court jester eventually found themselves in England, where the image and character of the Western clown was finally established. The clown first began to take shape within the Grimaldi family and more specifically within Joseph Grimaldi.²² Grimaldi's grandfather was a great dancer and his father a ballet master and actor. His father played the role various Commedia characters such as Pantaloon and Harlequin within English theatre.

Although Grimaldi's father was also referred to as "clown," it was Joseph Grimaldi that first established the modern image of the clown, as the

²² This is where the term "Joey" for clowns was derived.

West knows it. His debut as clown was as a child when he performed with his father, the “shipwrecked mariner,” as the little clown at the age of only one year and eleven months.²³ It may be said that England’s greatest contribution to pantomime was the introduction of the clown through the Grimaldis. “The English clown indulged mostly in acrobatics and slapstick; instead of half-masked, he wore heavy make-up and, like the ancient mimes, had an enormous nose, large mouth, exaggerated hips, and thin legs.”²⁴ It was in England where the most notable elements of the clown had finally come together and where we find the first appearance of the Western clown.

Concluding the Clown

Since Joseph Grimaldi and the birth of the clown several breeds of the clown have emerged. One example is found within the art of “clowning” where the clown is used as a channel for dance competitions, intended to form a “positive release and alternative to violence”²⁵ among the urban

²³ George Cruikshank, et. al, *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi 1778-1837*, (London: Schulze and Co., 1846), 4-5.

²⁴ Lust, *From the Greek*, 50.

²⁵ V.P. Franklin, “Commentary: *Send in the Clowns...Please!*” *Journal of African American History* 90 (2005): 188-189.

youth. Another example is seen within the fetishism of the clown, where the clown has become a sexual object with an entire category of pornography dedicated to its very character (referred to as “pornomedy—a wacky marriage of porn and comedy”).²⁶ As a final example, the Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army is an alternative activist group that uses the clown character and its humor as a means of building social and political resistance.

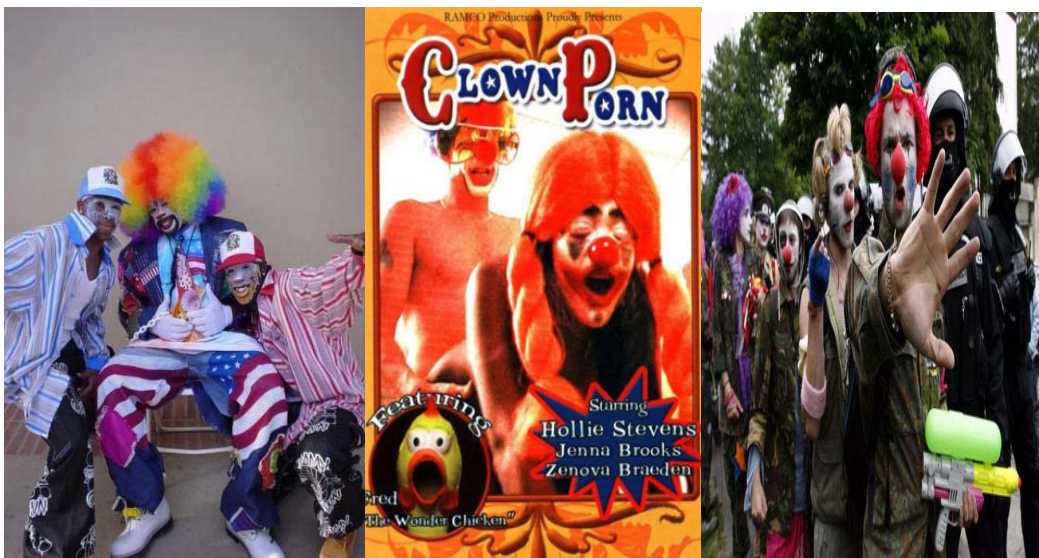


Figure 4 (left) Tommy the clown (Center) Clown Porn, and (right) The Clown Army

The clown has come to inspire innovative creations such as those that I have mentioned above and more. However, the use of the clown and its multiple functions could not have been made possible without the

²⁶ Anonymous, “Clown Porn” Ramco Productions, http://www.ramcoproductions.com/press/1_10_05.html, (accessed June 18 2008).

balancing act of those figures who have set the stage for the clown's first grand appearance. The pantomime, La Commedia dell' Arte, and the court jester have played the most influential role in the formation of the Western clown. Had this emergence and sequence of personas not taken place, the Western world would not have what it knows today as the clown.